MOLLY McDONALD

A TALE OF THE FRONTIER

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Hamlin turned the situation over deliberately in his mind, satisfied that Hughes had reviewed the possibilities correctly. If Le Fevre's party had got through at all, then that was the most likely spot for them to be hiding in. They would have drifted beyond doubt, farther than Hughes supposed, probably, as he had been sheltered from the real violence of the wind as it raged on the open plain. They might be fifteen, even twenty miles away, and so completely drifted in as to be undiscoverable except through accident. What course then was best to pursue? The storm was likely to continue violent for a day, perhaps two days longer. His horses were exhausted, and Carroll helpless. It might not even be safe to leave the latter alone. Yet if the frozen man could be left in the hut to take care of himself and the ponies, would there be any hope of success in an effort to proceed up the river on foot? He could make Hughes go—that wasn't the difficulty—but probably they couldn't cover five miles a day through the snowdrifts. And, even if they did succeed in getting through in time to intercept the fugitives, the others would possess every advantage—both position for defense, and horses on which to escape. Hughes, lighting his pipe, confident now in his own mind that he was personally safe, seemed to sense the problem troubling the Sergeant.

"I reckon I know this kentry well 'nough," he said lazily, "ter give yer a pointer er two. I've rounded up long horns west o' yere. Them fellers

Her Face Was in His Memory.

ain't goin' to strike out fer the Canadian till after the storm quits. By thet time yer ponies is rested up in better shape than theirs will be, and we kin strike 'cross to the sou'west. We're bound either to hit 'em, or ride 'cross thar trail.'

"But the woman!" protested Hamlin, striding across the floor. "What may happen to her in the meanwhile? She is an Eastern girl unaccustomed to this life—a—a lady."

"Yer don't need worry none 'bout thet. Ef she's the right kind she'll stan' more'n a man when she has to. I reckon it won't be none too pleasant 'long with Gene an' them Cheyenne bucks, but if she's pulled through so far, thar ain't nuthin' special goin' ter happen till they git to the Injun camp."

"You mean her fate will be decided in council?"

"Sure; thet's Cheyenne law. Le Fevre kuows it, an' ol' Koleta would knife him in a minute if he got gay. He's a devil all right—thet ol' buck—but he's afraid of Black Kettle, an' thar won't be no harm done to the gal."

The Sergeant walked over to the fire, and stared down into the red embers, striving to control himself. He realized the truth of all Hughes said, and yet had to fight fiercely his inclination to hasten to her rescue. The very thought of her alone in those ruthless hands was torture. There was no selfishness in the man't heart, no hope of winning this girl for himself, yet he knew now that he loved her; that for him she was the one woman in all the world. Her face was in his memory; the very soughing of the wind seemed her voice calling him. But the real man in him—the plainsman instinct—conquered the impetuosity of the lover. There must be no mistake made—no rash, hopeless effort. Better delay, than ultimate failure, and Hughes' plan was the more practical way.

"You're right, old man. We'll wait," he said sternly. "Now to get ready. Have you a corral?"

The other made a gesture with his hand.

"Twenty rod b'low, under the bluff."

"We'll drive the horses down, feed and water them. But first come with me; there is a half-frozen man up yonder."

They plowed through the snow together, choking and coughing in the thick swirl of flakes that beat against their faces. The three horses, powdered white, stood tails to the storm, with head to the bluff, while the drifts completely covered Carroll He was sleeping, warm in the blankets, and the two men picked him up and stumbled along with their burden to the shelter of the cabin. Then Hughes faced the blizzard again, leading the horses to the corral, while Hamlin ministered to the semi-conscious soldier, laying him out upon a pile of soft skins, and vigorously rubbing his limbs to restore circulation. The man was stupid from exposure, and in some pain, but exhibited no dangerous symptoms. When wrapped again in his blankets, he fell instantly asleep. Hughes returned, mantled with snow, and, as the door opened, the howl of the storm swept by.

"No better outside?"

"Lord, no! Worse, if anything. Wind more east, sweepin' the snow up the valley. We'll be plum shet up in an hour, I reckon. Hosses all right, though."

In the silence they could hear the fierce beating against the door, the shrieking of the storm-fiend encompassing them about.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The Chase.

Hamlin never forgot those two days and nights of waiting, while the storm roared without and the clouds of drifting snow made any dream of advance impossible. Trained as he was to patience, the delay left marks in his face, and his nerves throbbed with pain. His mind was with her constantly, even in moments of uneasy sleep, picturing her condition unsheltered from the storm and protected only by Le Fevre and his two Indian allies. If he could only reach them, only strike a blow for her release, it would be such a relief. The uncertainty weighed upon him, giving unrestricted play to the imagination, and, incidentally awakening a love for the girl so overwhelming as almost to frighten him. He had fought this feeling heretofore, deliberately, satisfied that such ambition was hopeless. He would not attempt to lower her to his level, nor give her the unhappiness of knowing that he dared misconstrue her frank friendliness into aught more tender. But these misfortunes had changed the entire outlook. Now he flung all pretense aside, eager to place his life on the altar to save her Even a dim flame of hope began blazing in his heart—hope that he might yet wring from Le Fevre a confession that would clear his name. He knew his man at last—knew him, and would track him now with all the pitiless ingenuity of a savage. Once he could stand erect, absolved of disgrace, a man again among men, he would ignore the uniform of the ranks, and go to her with all the pride of his race. Ay! and down in his heart he knew that she would welcome his coming; that her eyes would not look at the uniform, but down into the depths of his own.

He thought of it all as he paced the floor, or stared into the fire, while outside the wind raged and howled, piling the snow against the cabin front, and whirling in mad bursts up the valley. It would be death to face the fury of it on these open plains. There was nothing left him but to swear, and pace back and forth. Twice he and Hughes fought their way to the corral, found the horses sheltered in a little cove, and brought them food and water. The struggle to accomplish this was sufficient proof of the impossibility of going farther. Exhausted and breathless they staggered back into the quietness of the cabin, feeling as though they had been beaten by clubs. Once, desperate to attempt something, Hamlin suggested searching for the bodies of Wasson and Wade, but Hughes shook his head, staring at the other as though half believing him demented. The Sergeant strode to the door and looked out into the smother of snow; then came back without a word of protest.

Carroll improved steadily, complaining of pain where the frost had nipped exposed flesh, yet able to sit up, and eat heartily. There remained a numbness in his feet and legs, however, which prevented his standing alone, and both the others realized that he would have to be left behind when the storm abated. Hughes would go without doubt; on this point the Sergeant was determined. He did not altogether like or trust the man; he could not blot from memory the cowardly shot which killed Wasson, nor entirely rid himself of a fear that he, himself, had failed an old comrade, in not revenging his death; yet one thing was clear—the man's hatred for Le Fevre made him valuable. Treacherous as he might be by nature, now his whole soul was bent on revenge. Moreover he knew the lay of the land, the trail the fugitives would follow and to some extent Black Kettle's camp. Little by little Hamlin drew from him every detail of Le Fevre's life in the cattle country, becoming more and more convinced that both men were thieves, their herds largely stolen through connivance with Indians. Undoubtedly Le Fevre was the bigger rascal of the two, and possessed greater influence because of his marriage into the tribe.

It was the second midnight when the wind died down. Hamlin, sleeping fitfully, seemed to sense the change; he rose, forced the door open, and peered out eagerly. There was lightness to the sky, and all about, the unbroken expanse of snow sparkled in cold crystals. Nothing broke the white desolation but the dark waters of the river still unfrozen, and the gaunt limbs of the cottonwoods, now standing naked and motionless. The silence was profound, seeming almost painful after the wild fury of the past days. He could hear the soft purr of the water, and Carroll's heavy breathing. And it was cold, bitterly cold, the chill of it penetrating to his very bones. But for that he had no care—his mind had absorbed the one important fact; the way was open, they could go. He shook Hughes roughly into wakefulness, giving utterance to sharp, tense orders, as though he dealt with a man of his own troop.

"Turn out, lively, now. Yes, the storm is over. It's midnight, or a little after, and growing cold. Put on your heavy stuff, and bring up the two best horses. Come, now; you'll step off quicker than that, Hughes, if you ride with me. I'll have everything ready by the time you get here. Eat! Hell! We'll eat in the saddle! What's that, Carroll?"

"Ye ain't a-goin' to leave me yere alone, are ye, Sergeant?"

"No; there'll be two horses to keep you company. You've got a snap, man; plenty to eat, and a good fire—what more do you want—a nurse? Hughes, what, in the name of Heaven, are you standing there for? Perhaps you would like to have me stir you up. I will if those horses are not here in ten minutes."

The cowman, muffled to the ears in a buffalo coat, plunged profanely into the drift, slamming the door behind him. Hamlin hastily glanced over the few articles piled in readiness on the bench—ammunition, blankets, food—paying no heed to Carroll's muttering of discontent. By the time Hughes returned, he had everything strapped for the saddles. He thrust the cowman's rifle under his own flap, but handed the latter a revolver, staring straight into his eyes as he did so.

"I reckon you and I have got enough in common in this chase to play square," he said grimly. "We're both out after Le Fevre, ain't we?"

"You bet."

"All right, then; here's your gun. If you try any trickery, Hughes, I'd advise that you get me the first shot, for if you miss you'll never have another."

The man drew the sleeve of his coat over his lips, his eyes shifting before the Sergeant's steady gaze.

"I ain't thet sort," he muttered uneasily. "Yer don't need to think thet o' me."

"Maybe not," and Hamlin swung into the saddle carelessly. "Only I thought I'd tell you beforehand what would happen if you attempt any fool gun play. Take the lead, you know the trail."

Carroll, supporting himself by the table, crept across to the door and watched them, reckless as to the entering cold. The glare of the white snow revealed clearly the outlines of the disappearing horsemen, as they rode cautiously down the bank. The thin fringe of shore ice broke under the weight of the ponies' hoofs, as the riders forced them forward into the icy water. A moment later the two crept up the sharp incline of the opposite shore, appearing distinct against the sky as they attained the summit. Hamlin waved his hand, and then, on a lope, the figures vanished into the gloom. Crying, and swearing at his helplessness, the deserted soldier closed the door, and crept back shivering into his blankets.

Hughes turned his horse's head to the southwest, and rode steadily forward, the buffalo overcoat giving him a shaggy, grotesque appearance in the spectral light reflected from the snow. Without a word Hamlin followed, a pace behind. Their route lay for the first few miles across a comparatively level plateau, over which the fierce wind of the late storm had swept with such violence as to leave the surface packed firm. The night shut them in silently, giving to their immediate surroundings a mournful loneliness most depressing. There were no shadows, only the dull snow-gleam across which they passed like spectres, the only sound the crunching of their horses' hoofs on the crust. The Sergeant, staring about, felt that he had never looked upon a more depressing spectacle than this gloomy landscape, desolate and wind-swept, still overarched with low-lying storm clouds, black and ominous.

They advanced thus for two hours, making no attempt to force their animals, and scarcely exchanging a word, both men watchful of the snow underfoot in search of a possible trail, when the character of the country began to change. The level plain broke into a series of ridges of irregular formation, all evidently heading toward some more southern valley. In the depressions the snow lay banked in deep rifts, and, after plunging desperately through two of these, unable to judge correctly in the dim light where to ride, Hughes turned more to the south, skirting along the bare slope of a ridge, trusting some turn lower down would yield them the necessary westerning.

"It's over the ponies' heads down thar, Sergeant," he said, pointing sideways into the dark hollow, "an' we're bound to strike a cross-ridge afore we come to the bluffs."

"What bluffs? The Canadian?"

"Yep, it's badly broken kentry a long ways west o' yere. Bad lands mostly, an' a hell o' a place for cattle to hide out."

"Hughes, do you know where Black Kettle's camp is?"

"Well, no, not exactly. Las' winter the Cheyennes was settled 'bout op

Plunged Profanely Into the Drift.

posite the mouth o' Buffalo creek, an' thar 're down thar somewhar now. Thar 's one thing sure—they ain't any east o' thet. As we ain't hit no trail, I reckon as how Le Fevre's outfit must hev drifted further then I calc'lated."

"I thought so at the time," commented the other, quietly. "However, we will have to make the circle, and, if the country out yonder is as you describe, they will be no better off. They'll have to follow the ridges to get through. We may get a glimpse when daylight comes."

They rode on steadily, keeping down below the crest of the hills, yet picking a passage where the snow had been swept clear. The slipperiness of the incline made their progress slow, as they dared not risk the breaking of a horse's leg in that wilderness, and the faint glimmer was most confusing. The wind had ceased, the calm was impressive after the wild tumult, but the cold seemed to strengthen as the dawn advanced, viciously biting the exposed faces of the men. The straining ponies were white with frost. In the gray of a cheerless dawn they reached the first line of bluffs, and drew rein just below the summit, where they could look off across the lower ridges to the westward.

It was a wild, desolate scene, the dull gray sky overhead, the black and white shading below. Mile on mile the picture unrolled to the horizon the vista widening slowly as the light increased, bringing forth the details of barren, wind-swept ridges and shallow valleys choked with snow. Not a tree, not a shrub, not even a rock broke the dead monotony. All was loneliness and silence. The snow lay gleaming and untrampled, except as here and there a dull brown patch of dead grass darkened the side of a hill. Hamlin shadowed his eyes with gloved hands, studying intently inch by inch the wide domain. Suddenly he arose in his stirrups, bending eagerly forward.

"By heaven! There they are, Hughes," he exclaimed, feeling the hot blood course through his veins. "See, on the incline of that third ridge There is a shadow there, and they are not moving. Here; draw in back of me; now you can see. It looks as though they had a horse down."

Hughes stared long in the direction indicated, his eyes narrowed into mere slits.

"Ah! that's it," he said at last. "Horse broke a leg; shot it jest then—I seen the flash. Now they're goin on. See! One fellow climbin' up behind 'nother, an' the horse left lyin thar on the snow."

"How many people do you make out?" and Hamlin's voice shook a little. "There's four, ain't there?"

At that distance the fugitives looked like mere black dots. It could scarcely be determined that they moved, and yet their outlines were distinct against the background of white snow while the two watchers possessed the trained vision of the plains. Hughes answered after a deliberate inspection, without so much as turning his head.

"Thar's four; leastwise thar was four hosses, and two—the Injuns likely—are ridin' double. Thar animals are 'bout played, it looks ter me—just able ter crawl. Ain't had no fodder in 'bout the size o' it. We ought to be able ter head thet bunch off 'fore they git to the Canadian at thet rate o' travel—hey, Sergeant?"

Hamlin's eyes followed the long sweep of the cross-ridge, studying its trend, and the direction of the intervening valleys. Once down on the other slope all this extensive view would be hidden; they would have to ride blindly, guessing at the particular swale along which those others were advancing. To come to the summit again would surely expose them to those keen Indian eyes. They would be searching the trail ahead ceaselessly, noting every object along the crests of the ridges. However, if the passage around was not blocked with snow, they ought to attain the junction in ample time. With twice as far to travel, their ponies were strong and fit and should win out against Le Fevre's starved beasts. He waved his gloved hand.

"We'll try it," he said, shortly; "come on, Hughes."

He led off along the steep side of the hill, and forcing his horse into a sharp trot, headed straight out into the white wilderness; Hughes, without uttering a word, brought down his quirt on his pony's flank and followed.

CHAPTER XXX.

The Fight in the Snow.

The slope toward the south had not been swept clear by the wind, and the horses broke through the crust to their knees, occasionally stumbling into hollows where the drifts were deep. This made progress slow, although Hamlin pressed forward recklessly, fully aware of what it would mean should the fugitives emerge first, and thus achieve a clear passage to the river. What was going on there to the right, behind the fringe of low hills, could not be conjectured, but to the left the riders could see clearly for a great distance over the desolate, snow-draped land, down to the dark waters of the Canadian and the shore beyond. It was all a desolate waste, barren of movement, and no smoke bore evidence of any Indian encampment near by. A mile or more to the west the river took a sharp bend, disappearing behind the bluffs, and on the open plain, barely visible against the unsullied mantle of snow, were dark specks, apparently moving, but in erratic fashion. The distance intervening was too great for either man to distinguish exactly what these might be, yet as they plunged onward their keen eyes searched the valley vigilantly through the cold clear air.

"Some of your long-horns, Hughes?" asked the Sergeant finally, pointing as he turned and glanced back. "Quite a bunch of cattle, it looks to me."

"Them thar ain't cows," returned the other positively. "Tha're too closely bunched up. I reckon it'll be Black Kettle's pony herd."

"Then his village will lie in beyond the big bend th re," and Hamlin rose in his stirrups, shading his eyes. "The herders haven't driven them far since the storm broke. You don't see any smoke, do you?"

Hughes shook his head.

"You wouldn't likely see none against the gray sky; them ponies is two er maybe three miles off, an' ther camp is likely a mile er so further. Thar's a big bend thar, as I remember; a sort o' level spot with bluff all 'round, 'cept on the side 'o ther river. We hed a cattle corral thar onc't, durin' a round-up. Most likely that's whar they are."

"And Le Fevre is heading straight for the spot. Well, he'll have to come out on this bench first."

"Yep, there sure ain't no valleys lying between. How many o' these yere gulch openings have we got past already?"

"Three; there's the fourth just ahead. That's the one they were trailing through. No doubt about that, is there?"

"Not 'less them Injuns took to the ridge. They wus sure in the fourth valley when we fust sighted the outfit back thar. Whatcher goin' ter do, Sergeant? Jump 'em a hoss-back, an' just pump lead?"

(To be continued)

MOTHERS, TEACH YOUR CHILDREN GOOD MANNERS

One of the hardest tasks for the young mother to assume is the disciplining of her children. Before the baby begins to talk or speak she spoils it to her heart's content, and it is almost impossible to break the habit as the child grows older.

When the little one has learned the use of his legs and tongue he has also learned to use his little brain, and all impressions made at that time are bound to remain.

It is never too early to teach your child good manners ,obedience to those in authority, and deference to elders. Many mothers have laughed at and even encouraged their children's naughtiness, and then when the little ones have passed the age where their little pranks have seemed funny they have been severely punished for the same things which formerly only brought forth laughter and murmurs of "Isn't that too cunning?"

The injustice of such methods rankles in the childs brain and often makes the little one sullen and indifferent, where kinder treatment would have brightened the young heart wonderfully. There are many children between ten and thirteen who seem to have naturally sulky dispositions, but outsiders can never judge of what is upsetting the little mind—what acts of apparent injustice have made them lose their brightness.

How many mothers have been heard to exclaim, "I really don't know what to do with Harold; he is becoming so naughty lately." In nine cases out of ten Harold has been just as naughty all along, only he has ceased to be amusing. No wonder that our grandmothers shake their heads over children of today and murmur that it was not like this in their day!

Mothers, keep a firm hand on your children when they are so young that obedience becomes a habit. If you let their shortcomings pass now, you will surely pay for it as well as they. No amount of punishment at eleven or twelve will give you that absolute control which might have been yours had you exerted through all the previous years. And not only will you pay for your laxity when the children are young, but heartaches and sighs will be your lot when your little ones become adolescent.

The boy who has been allowed to run wild the first ten years of his life will not be whipped into obedience the next three or four, and will certainly go his own way in his young manhood, unmindful of any control his parents may endeavor to exert.

When the child is very young teach him to obey his parents as involuntarily as he would eat when hungry. Teach him the natural little courtesies of life so that they become a part of his mature.